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CH 7 *The Odyssey* in the 'Broom Cupboard': *Ulysses 31* and *Odysseus: The Greatest Hero of them All* on 'Children's BBC', 1985-86

Sarah Miles

This chapter explores two television programmes, *Ulysses 31* and *Odysseus: The Greatest Hero of them All* (hereafter *Odysseus*), for the ways that each retells the myths about Odysseus, with their origins in Homer, for a television audience of children in the 1980s. These two television series merit discussion because they offer individual responses to the myths that were contemporary with one another and aimed directly at children. *Ulysses 31* was a Franco-Japanese production and animation, while *Odysseus* was a live-action, story-to-camera BBC production. Both programmes were initially transmitted in the UK (1985-6) as part of the BBC's newly-created 'Children's BBC' on BBC 1, and they each reconfigured the hero Odysseus and his myths by drawing on different aspects of 1970s and '80s film and television culture in order to contemporise the classical material.¹ The chapter shows how this was achieved through a combination of innovative story-telling techniques and creative use of the mode of television and televisual animation coupled with a detailed knowledge of the myths of Odysseus. Moreover, these two programmes provide contemporary examples of localised (British) and international (Franco-Japanese) production contexts so that it is possible to compare how these local and international contexts shaped the format and creativity of each programme. Ultimately this study highlights the way that *Ulysses 31* drew on popular film culture and Japanese techniques in animation, framing Odysseus' heroism via cinematic appeal in order to make the stories of Odysseus resonate with new audiences, whereas *Odysseus* adapted the BBC's *Jackanory* story-to-camera format and so constructed an anglicised Odysseus that contemporised the character and his setting for British audiences of the 1980s while still evoking the wit and wiles of the Homeric Odysseus.²

For viewers in the UK both programmes were seen within the same transmission context when they first aired on 'Children's BBC', 1985-6. Therefore, although the genre and mode of production are points of divergence between the two programmes, they do share a context of transmission at the very start of the BBC's new programming format, 'Children's BBC', created by Pat Hubbard, Head of Presentation at the BBC in 1985. This was itself an innovation in children's programming since it included for the first time a presenter live in a small studio, which earned the name 'Broom Cupboard', from where the presenter introduced and reacted to each programme. 'Children's BBC' was set up as a direct response to 'Children's ITV', which had launched in 1983 with a presenter in a studio. The new BBC format encouraged audience responses in the form of letters, postcards, drawings, birthday cards and sing-a-longs, all of which were inspired by the television shows, and this provided a means of response from the child-audience to the television programmes. Therefore, the context of transmission for *Ulysses 31* and *Odyseus* was at a point of change in the culture of children's television on the BBC which shaped the programmes' reception by young audiences in the UK.

The discussion of these two television programmes contributes to understanding of children's programme-making and programming culture on local and international levels, on which there has been a growth in scholarship during the twenty-first century. This can be seen particularly in the work of Máire Messenger Davies and Jeanette Steemers, alongside the launch in 2007 of the *Journal of Children and Media*,³ and wider public interest in the touring exhibition 'The Story of Children's Television from 1946 to Today' (2015) at a time when UK children's television is under threat.⁴ In addition, *Ulysses 31* was not just a children's television programme, but also a children's animation, and this art-form has for so long been under-valued for its aesthetics and narrative power, particularly animation aimed at the younger viewer.⁵ This chapter, therefore, adds to the increasing interest in the importance

and significance of animation, and here specifically animation as a medium for children's television and classical adaptations.⁶ In the world of animation, we are drawn into a world of imagination and seemingly endless possibilities, although always ones that reflect the contemporary contexts in which that animation was created. In the case of *Ulysses 31*, the contexts of future time, a setting in space and the presence of gods allows a freedom of creativity in responding to the stories of Odysseus that produces an artwork not constrained by the need for physical actors, models and cameras, but one that engages with contemporary science-fiction/fantasy film and television in order to draw children into the stories of Odysseus. By comparison, Tony Robinson's performance in *Odysseus* used his power of storytelling set in the context of real-world 1980s Cornwall and South-West England to help feed the imagination without presenting the fully dramatised version with multiple actors, sound-effects and music.⁷

The narrative modes of these two programmes are of particular interest because children's media, including television and film, are some of the first ways through which people experience Greek myths and events of the Graeco-Roman past. As such, they can play an influential, formative role in shaping attitudes to the classical world in childhood and adulthood. The adult creators of children's television are aware of the ability to educate as well as entertain their audiences, and this is something within the remit of BBC programming for viewers of all ages.⁸ The BBC's attitude at the launch of 'Children's BBC' was to create a child's version of adult television, as can be seen from its news release which speaks of "Jonny Briggs", the first soap opera for five to eight year-olds; "Galloping Galaxies", the first sitcom set in outer space ...'.⁹ As Steemers neatly puts it: 'the BBC was focused from the start on providing a public schedule in miniature for its young audiences, based on their perceived needs with a varied diet of drama, information programmes, and some animation that protected them from commercial exploitation'.¹⁰ Children's television is defined by its

audience, but created by adults whose level of concern with child development and learning is reflected in their modes of production. Some, and by no means all, 1980s adaptations of the myths of Odysseus reflect detailed knowledge of these and other classical sources, as we shall see is the case with *Ulysses 31* and *Odysseus*. This is a choice made by the programme makers. Sheila Murnaghan notes, ‘children’s versions of the classics can help us to think about popular versions of the classics more generally, about why they exist and what they accomplish.’¹¹ These two programmes serve as examples of the diverse ways that children’s television can respond creatively and freely to the stories of Odysseus while maintaining a close knowledge of the ancient sources as the basis for their creative adaptation in order to reconfigure classical works for new audiences of children.

A1 ‘By the great galaxies!’ Animating Odysseus in *Ulysses 31*

B1 Content and cultural influences

Ulysses 31 was a twenty-six-episode animated television series for children which provided a fusion of space-adventure, Homer’s *Odyssey* and wider Greek mythology, set in the thirty-first century and carefully interweaving characters and stories derived from these ancient Greek sources. It tells of Ulysses’ wanderings through space and his efforts to save his companions and return home to earth and his wife Penelope.¹² The father-son dynamic is as central to the narrative as it is in Homer, but in contrast to the Greek epic, Ulysses travels with his son Telemachus, as well as Yumi from the planet Zotra and the robot Nono (see Figure 7.1) **[Insert Figure 7.1 here]** and with guidance from the on-board computer Shyrka, whose name is a Japanese corruption of Circe. In Homer Circe is the sorceress who directs Odysseus homewards, and Shyrka’s role as a navigation computer neatly incorporates this Homeric role.¹³ The spaceship in *Ulysses 31* is notably called the ‘Odyssey’, acting as a constant reminder of one of the classical influences for the series. The divine element is kept

alive in *Ulysses 31*, but there is no Athena to aid our hero, as found in Homer and other versions of the Greek myths. Instead Ulysses battles directly against the will of Zeus throughout the series, and there is continual reference to ‘the gods’, who are represented mainly by a masculine voice, visually inspired by classical Greek sculpture (and depicted as if they were stone with no facial or physical movements), and whose emblem is the trident. The foregrounding of a male voice for divine power and the removal of the female voice of Athena is in keeping with the marginalisation of female roles in mainstream science-fiction/fantasy television and film of the 1970s-1980s.¹⁴

Throughout the series numerous narrative elements which have their roots in Homer’s *Odyssey* form part of the animated action, which are re-set within a futuristic, space-age of robots and computers. The order of narrative events loosely follows that of Odysseus’ journey homeward in Homer’s *Odyssey*, except that the series ends with Ulysses’ escape from Hades rather than after his return home to Penelope. However, *Ulysses 31* deftly uses a time-travelling episode in order to depict the reunion between the original Ulysses of ancient Greece (the ancestor of Ulysses 31) and his Penelope.¹⁵ The series starts with the blinding of the one-eyed Cyclops (a giant bio-mechanical creation of the god Poseidon), then other familiar characters appear including Aeolus king of the winds, the Laestrygonians (although they are not cannibals), Scylla and Charybdis (depicted visually as two planets encircled by an infinity-loop representing fire and ice), the Sirens, Circe (including Hermes’ appearance as Ulysses’ guide and protector, just as he appears in the *Odyssey*¹⁶), Calypso (a love-interest for Ulysses), the lotus-eaters (represented as stereotypical hippies), the battle against the suitors (uniquely set in ancient Greece) and finally the journey to Hades. In addition, elements of wider Greek mythology recur within the series: Ulysses battles Medusa, meets Sisyphus and nearly swaps places with him, solves the riddle of the sphinx, outwits Chronus, meets Theseus and Ariadne and kills the Minotaur, helps Atlas, sees the three Fates, and travels

with Orpheus in search of Eurydice on the way to Hades. The series engages closely with the rich resource of Greek mythology as well as episodes in Homer's *Odyssey*.

However, the journey of this Ulysses is not just one of Greek mythology in space, and the breadth of cultural material beyond ancient Greece incorporated into this series is equally wide: Episode 15, 'Before the Flood', involves Ulysses giving an ad hoc lesson to the children on Inca culture and the shifting poles of prehistoric earth, and Episode 22, 'The City of Cortex' considers the effects of an evil super-computer on a society. Meanwhile stories deal with themes of love, loss, family unity, slave labour, gender inequality (as Ulysses helps Hypsipyle free women from enslavement by men), and even drug addiction (via the lotus-eaters). In addition, there is a notable mix of science-fiction/fantasy references, including to Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) for the visual conceptualisation of the animation set in space. Episode 12, 'Trapped between Fire and Ice', even sees the characters find an abandoned ship from Earth with an astronaut in suspended animation who is said to be from 2001 specifically.¹⁷ A second significant cinematic influence on *Ulysses 31* is George Lucas' films *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). Many aspects of *Ulysses 31* in terms of the orchestration of space-battle scenes, thematic music and the style of sound-effects which recall those of the Star Wars universe (including light-sabre sounds for Ulysses' weapon and noises reminiscent of R2D2, X-wings and TIE fighters). There is even a snippet of music from the scene of The Battle of Hoth where Luke Skywalker destroys an AT-AT with a grenade in *The Empire Strikes Back*.¹⁸

The animated world of *Ulysses 31* affords us visual, live-action depictions of imagined pasts and futures with musical soundtracks and special effects from contemporary popular culture used to communicate and reshape the stories of Odysseus for its intended child audience. The stories, characters, art-work and overall story-arc in *Ulysses 31* show an acute awareness of the ancient sources in episodes that are, nonetheless, as creative with

Greek myths as they are knowledgeable about their workings. One example of this occurs in Episode 24 ('Strange Meeting', 'Ulysse rencontre Ulysse'¹⁹) when Ulysses of the thirty-first century is forced to travel back in time to help the Ulysses of ancient Greece regain Penelope and his throne. Only if the future Ulysses succeeds can he continue to exist in his own time, and so the Ulysses of past and future are here explicitly linked by their genealogy. The two Ulysses characters meet, and their conversation is at times metatextual, including the revealing line: '5,000 years lie between us but our stories appear to be linked'. Linked they are, and the writers here openly declare it to their audience. In Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus slowly moves towards his final act of vengeance on the suitors, who are trying to gain the hand of his wife Penelope, the narrator intervenes with this passage:

EXT While they [the suitors] were talking Odysseus, master of stratagems, had picked up the great bow and checked it all over. As a minstrel skilled at the lyre and in song easily stretches a string round a new leather strap, fixing the twisted sheep-gut at both ends, so he strung the great bow without effort or haste. Then with his right hand, he tested the string, and it sang as he plucked it with a sound like a swallow's note. The suitors were utterly mortified; the colour faded from their cheeks ...²⁰

The great bow mentioned here was used in the contest to decide which of the suitors would marry Penelope in the absence of Odysseus. However, all the suitors failed to string the bow and in the passage above the narrator slows down the narrative time to focus on the precise moment when Odysseus strings the bow, adding the musical simile to emphasise the sweet sound of the bowstring in stark contrast to the slaughter of the suitors that is to follow. The parallel scene in *Ulysses 31*, as the suitors fail to string the bow, clearly owes something to peplum movies of earlier decades, including the successful *Ulysse* (dir. M. Camerini, 1954),

starring Kirk Douglas, Silvano Manganò and Anthony Quinn.²¹ However, in this key moment of suspense *Ulysses 31* is alone in retaining from Homer's narrative both the distracted suitors and Ulysses plucking the bowstring which scares the suitors. The key change is that in *Ulysses 31* the sound of a low acoustic guitar string rather than a swallow/lyre. No other television or cinematic adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* of which I am aware employs this musical moment. The cinematic and dramatic qualities of Homer's *Odyssey* remain effective in twentieth century media. Therefore, amid the myriad of contemporary and historical cultural influences, *Ulysses 31* recreates a scene from its Homeric forebear, imitating this moment of tension from the ancient epic, but which updates the acoustic reference so that the bow in *Ulysses 31* resonates, not like an ancient lyre, but like a popular contemporary instrument, the guitar.

B2 Production and transmission

Ulysses 31 was in the unique position of being the first Japanese-French co-production split between the French television production company DiC Entertainment and Japan's Tokyo Movie Shinsha [TMS Entertainment]. Jean Chalopin and Fujioka Yutaka were the producers, and Chalopin was co-writer of the screenplay and script with Nina Wolmark.²² It first aired on FR3 in France and RTL in Luxemburg in 1981, entitled *Ulysse 31*, but in Japan only parts of the series were shown in 1988 under the title 宇宙伝説ユリシーズ 31 *Uchū Densetsu*

Yurishīzu Sātīwan (*Space Legend Ulysses 31*).²³ *Ulysses 31* was redubbed in order to reach audiences in UK, Spain, Italy, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Greece, Portugal, Australia, Canada and the USA, including rebroadcasts from the 1980s to the 2000s alongside VHS and DVD releases.²⁴ In France in the early 2000s *Ulysses 31* was shown as part of 'Soirées Gloubiboulga' at which thousands of adults gathered to watch cartoons from their childhood,

indicating its continuing appeal to adults.²⁵ Amanda Potter's research into British adult viewers of *Xena Warrior Princess* included a question about their prior knowledge of Odysseus, and five out of twenty-five responses cited *Ulysses 31* as contributing to this knowledge, demonstrating how these viewers had made a connection between the animated *Ulysses 31* and a broader understanding of Greek mythology.²⁶

The creation and production of this animated children's series represented a key point in the global spread of anime (Japanese animation) which has a unique narrative form and cutting-edge visuals. In *Ulysses 31*, moreover, we see an early stage of this fusion of Japanese and European artistic forms and genres taking place. This co-production contained an impressive list of figures in anime including the director Nagahama Tadao, who sadly died before the series was completed,²⁷ and Araki Shingo, famed as a character designer for anime, whose most internationally successful work, *Saint Seiya* (1986-2003), was inspired by Greek mythology. Araki had previously worked in the studio of the great Tezuka Osamu, whose name is perhaps better known in the UK and who created *Astro Boy*, 鉄腕アトム (*Tetsuwan Atomu*), the first animated Japanese television series in 1963 based on his manga. Notably Araki designed characters for the pilot episode of *Ulysses 31* with distinctive anime characteristics, but these were then altered to create more American-styled characters, which also meant the gods were depicted to recall classical Greek sculpture, again adding an air of classical art to this self-styled space-opera. *Ulysses 31* also employed the artistry of Kawamori Shôji, the famous designer of mecha anime (creator of *Macross* and involved in the design of Optimus Prime in *Transformers*).²⁸ Kawamori was in charge of designing the spaceship, 'the Odyssey', which incorporated the logo of FR3, the French television channel which broadcast the series.

Ulysses 31 represented a huge leap forward in animation: the production time for each episode was increased from one week to two; whereas the standard of anime at this time was four to six frames per second, *Ulysses 31* was twelve frames per second.²⁹ These factors allowed for a level of detail and fluidity in animation that defined the series. Early examples of wire-frame model 3D animation also appeared scattered throughout (its usage was limited by budget and computer processing time). Therefore, this was not a cheap, quickly produced animation but rather one in which much time, talent and innovative animation was invested from both France and Japan. This also created a unique aesthetic for the series, drawing on conventions distinctive to Japanese manga and anime. Scott McCloud has discussed the difference between Japanese manga and American comics that he observed as an artist in 1982 noting that manga contained iconic characters, wordless narrative style, choice of shots, a sense of place, emotional intensity.³⁰ Meanwhile Ledoux and Ranney note that 1970s Japanese animated television series ‘absolutely overflow with tracking shots, long-view establishing shots, fancy pans, unusual point-of-view “camera angles” and extreme close-ups’, whereas US-animation: ‘tends to thrive in an action-obsessed middle distance’.³¹ The techniques mentioned by McCloud, Ledoux and Ranney are apparent in *Ulysses 31*, which marked it out as distinct from other animation available to non-Japanese audiences of animation at the time. For example, the reunion of father and son in Episode 1 (‘Vengeance of the Gods’) employs a mixture of changing shots and perspectives, wordlessness, music and silence to create a powerful moment in the cartoon; in Episode 11 (‘The Seat of Forgetfulness’) the visualisation of the power of the Fates is abstracted and detailed, in a wordless sequence representing a myriad of tiny black and white figures working the loom that weaves the thread of the Fates. One of the directors of *Ulysses 31*, Bernard Deyriès, similarly acknowledged the unique aesthetic at work in children’s anime in the 1970s-’80s:

EXT The Japanese offered a breath of fresh air compared with Disney, ... I was disillusioned by the USA. The concepts there are often the same, too simplistic/black-and-white (my translation).³²

In *Ulysses 31* the mixture of techniques of anime, influences of contemporary science-fiction/fantasy, and stories from Homer and Greek mythology meant that *Ulysses 31* appealed widely, as evidenced by the number of countries which aired the series. This point has been noted by Jason Bainbridge, who considers that these Franco-Japanese animations are ‘fascinating examples of convergent media texts, convergent not only in terms of their *production*, but also in terms of their *content*’.³³ However, the picture is complicated when one looks more closely at the localised cultural variations in the way *Ulysses 31* was broadcast in different countries. This can be seen by comparing the various dubbings of *Ulysses 31*: France kept the Greek names and mythological topics in the foreground for all their episode titles, while the English dubbing played down these elements (see Table 7.1) [Insert Table 7.1 here], and the French character ‘Thémis’ becomes the English ‘Yumi’.³⁴ Although there is no attempt to imitate the distinctive language of Homer (filled with epithets, stock-phrases and similes), *Ulysses 31* develops an individual style of language through the oaths which the characters swear (for example, ‘By the Great Galaxies!’, ‘Quivering Quasers!’, ‘Quarks and Charms!’ and countless more), which marks it out as clearly a separate time and culture from that of its audience.

Animation is an internationally understood form of popular culture, which travels very easily around the world due to the ease of dubbing the soundtracks and voices. *Ulysses 31* arrived in the UK in 1985, when all twenty-six episodes were broadcast in the first year of the new ‘Children’s BBC’ programming format (weekly at 4.30pm, 7 November 1985 - 8 May 1986). In 1981 animation only made up 9% of the BBC children’s schedule compared to

35% in 1996 (on ITV the leap was similarly from 9% to 40%).³⁵ Therefore, animation on ‘Children’s BBC’ was still in itself a novelty in 1985. The success of *Ulysses 31* with UK-based children is evident from the bountiful stream of pictures and drawings which was sent into ‘Children’s BBC’ and displayed in the ‘Broom Cupboard’.³⁶ There was even a mimed sing-a-long of the theme music to *Ulysses 31* which presenter Philip Schofield conducted, and copies of lyrics were sent out to children for *Mysterious Cities of Gold* on request, suggesting a degree of audience participation. As a later presenter, Andi Peters, acknowledged, ‘Singalongs were part of the ‘Children’s BBC’ tradition’.³⁷ Indeed, the internationally produced and transmitted *Ulysses 31* was made to fit into the BBC’s programming format with Canadian voice-actors speaking in English. The Franco-Japanese collaboration that was behind the success of *Ulysses 31* was not made clear to its intended audience beyond the names in the end-credits, and yet it is the distinctive aesthetics and creativity of this collaboration which contributed to the programme’s success.

A2 Tony Robinson and story-telling in *Odysseus: The Greatest Hero of Them All*

In contrast to the international collaboration involved in the creation of *Ulysses 31*, *Odysseus: The Greatest Hero of them All* was a more home-grown affair. This twelve-part series was produced by the BBC’s Children’s Department, but only two episodes of *Odysseus* are accessible to researchers in the BFI National Film and Television Archive; the status of the remainder of the series in the BBC archive is unknown.³⁸ The main extant source for the series lies in the two books closely adapted from the television series and published by BBC/Knight Books (1986, 1987) and audio-books of Tony Robinson reading out these books unabridged. Both the written and audio formats preserve the use of comic-book inspired sound-effects which also characterised the television series (doors shut with a ‘GUDUNG!’;

Charybdis bursts forth with a ‘SPLUUUUME!’). This gives a sense of the character of the series, but does not capture the energy and visual aesthetic of the television version.

Odysseus was created by leading British comedic talent of the 1980s: Tony Robinson wrote and performed *Odysseus*, and Richard Curtis was a co-writer. Curtis had already written a book for children in 1982, *The Story of Elsie and Jane*, and in the *Odysseus* books Curtis is described in the ‘About the Author’ section as someone who studied ‘Classics at Papplewick and Harrow School, and Greek at Oxford’.³⁹ The choice to include this information adds an authorising tone to this retelling of Odysseus’ adventures in its relationship with classical sources. This is all the more notable since Curtis in fact studied for an English degree at Oxford, but here emphasis is put on his study of Greek as part of his degree, although, as we shall see below, Robinson’s role in the reworkings of classical sources is just as important to the television series. *Odysseus* adopted the simple technique of story-telling to camera, as had been used in *Jackanory*. *Odysseus* was filmed on location in Cornwall and South-West England - indoors, outdoors and in public, with Robinson constantly on the move creating a lively, real-time atmosphere for the re-telling of these stories of Odysseus in contemporary Britain. The story-telling of Robinson employed frequent jokes, word-play and contemporary humour: for example, there is a touch of political satire through the inclusion of an unnamed female Prime Minister, in the role of Laocoön, who is swallowed by the sea monster outside Troy; and the Cyclops, upon seeing the Greek sailors (and before eating some of them), declares, ‘I like Greek food’. But the narrative could also change to a more sombre mood when required: for example, when describing the death of Odysseus’ dog Argos or Telemachus’ reunion with Odysseus. This variety of tone was coupled with endless enthusiasm and energy in performance to bring the stories of Odysseus to life.

Both Robinson and Curtis had been involved in *The Black Adder* (1983) for the BBC, and by Spring of 1985 *Blackadder II* was in pre-production. Meanwhile, *Odysseus* was first broadcast as part of ‘Children’s BBC’ twice a week from 13 November to 22 December 1986. *Odysseus* clearly came at a time of great creativity for Curtis and Robinson. However, *Odysseus* was also Curtis and Robinson’s second work together, following the four-part *Theseus the Hero*, which was made for *Jackanory* and broadcast from 11 to 28 January 1985. The programme used the same to-camera style as *Odysseus*, and it was filmed on the streets around Bristol. Although no known television recordings survive, the *Radio Times* summary of the first episode gives a flavour of the humour which would be further developed in *Odysseus*: ‘Theseus was a hero from the word go. Well he had to be, didn’t he, with enemies like Pinebender and the Great Tosser to contend with. But most villainous of all was his treacherous Uncle Leos - and he was unspeakably nasty.’⁴⁰ This summary also reveals that amid the humour Robinson and Curtis were acutely aware of the mythical tradition involving Theseus and his labours. For example, Pinebender was the Greek epithet, *πιτυοκάμπτη* (*pituokampite*), for Sinis, who killed his victims by tying their arms and legs to bent pine-trees before letting the trees go and tearing their bodies apart. Moreover, Robert Graves’ popular book *Greek Myths* employs this very epithet, Pinebender, as he tells the story of Theseus and Sinis. This book had been in wide circulation in the UK since its first edition in 1955,⁴¹ and the dedications in the first *Odysseus* book accompanying the television series contain the words ‘and written in memory of Robert Graves’, again indicating his influence on the work of Robinson and Curtis.⁴² Therefore, *Theseus the Hero* contained a mixture of humour and erudition which at least suggests the dual concerns of its creators to educate while providing entertainment for children about Greek mythology. This approach is continued and developed with *Odysseus*, as the *Radio Times* entries for each episode illustrate (see Table 7.2). **[Insert Table 7.2 here]**

Theseus the Hero was produced by Angela Beeching and directed by David Bell, and both worked with Robinson and Curtis soon after to create *Odysseus*. However, this time the story-telling was not a part of *Jackanory*, but rather Robinson approached Beeching, the producer of *Jackanory*, with the idea for *Odysseus*. *Jackanory* was a blend of children's literature and television created by the Children's Department at the BBC in 1965 and that ran until 1996. The key point in *Jackanory* was the direct address of the storyteller to the audience, who made direct and continual eye-contact with the imagined viewer, while the voice, face and gesture told the story, sometimes accompanied by props and illustrated or performed inserts.⁴³ By 1985 the *Jackanory* format had been running for twenty years, and *Jackanory* had developed its own traditions in televisual story-telling for UK children. Therefore, by adapting the *Jackanory* format, the makers of *Theseus the Hero* and *Odysseus* were speaking in a commonly held form of televisual language; children were familiar with the concept of a story to camera, and so they already knew how to 'read' the programme. However, as the producer Beeching put it, 'Tony took it a huge step further'.⁴⁴ Robinson had already developed his own approach to story-telling on television, as seen in the popular *Fat Tulip* (1985) for 'Children's ITV', written by Debbie Gates and Robinson, which spawned further series and books. In *Fat Tulip* Robinson narrated stories to camera, putting on an array of voices and moving around as he narrated while the camera slowly followed his movements. The manner of filming and narrative techniques from *Fat Tulip* were used and adapted further in *Odysseus* by the director Bell and Robinson who also employed filming techniques from the *The Tube*, a Channel Four live music programme produced by Tyne-Tees Television and presented by Jools Holland and Paula Yates (1982-7). As Bell noted, 'we used their innovative to-camera style that we felt was very cheeky and off-the-wall'.⁴⁵ The makers of *Odysseus* were experimenting with filming techniques in order to influence the way the narrative was perceived by children. Overall, it added an improvised air to proceedings, so

that Robinson's story-telling appeared genuine, without an autocue. However, this off-the-cuff effect was an illusion, and the scripting and filming had of course been carefully planned in advance. Bell acknowledges that the on-location shooting in Cornwall was intended to mirror in a contemporary way the historical locations of the story.⁴⁶ For example, Odysseus' departure from the young princess Nausicaa and the Phaeacians is shot on a small, idyllic Cornish quayside, against a background of a dry-stone building and rocky outcrop (see Figure 7.2).⁴⁷ **[Insert Figure 2 here]** In contrast, Robinson narrates Odysseus' approach to the suitor-infested palace of Ithaca from the site of a demolished building which is strewn with bent metal, broken concrete and an old traffic-cone, while cars pass in the background. This visual variety aided children in interpreting the scene of Odysseus returning home to his dilapidated and down-trodden Ithaca while grounding this Odysseus in a contemporary English setting.

Odysseus provided a chronological narrative of Odysseus' adventures, starting from his childhood and the boar-hunt where he receives the scar on his thigh through the Trojan war to his return home and reunion with Penelope. Therefore, the flashback narrative of Homer is not retained but instead a linear structure is used that was easy for children unfamiliar with the adventures of Odysseus to follow. Whereas *Ulysses 31* presents its lead character as a hero whose manly stature and perfect physical features mark out his heroic status and cinematic appeal, Robinson and Curtis' *Odysseus* conjures up a more intelligent, tricky and deceitful Odysseus, more reminiscent of the Homeric Odysseus, which they mixed with a sense of humour and colloquial tone that makes him instantly accessible to UK children. The visual setting too, of English towns, countryside and seaside locations grounds this Odysseus firmly within UK space and culture. This is a truly anglicised Odysseus.

Odysseus garnered critical attention at the time. Messenger Davies' article for *The Listener* declares that 'Libraries would do well to stand by for a rush on Homer', although as

Robinson's comments reveal it is Homeric tradition rather than Homeric epic that *Odysseus* recasts for its child audience.⁴⁸ Notably, Messenger Davies attempts to contextualise *Odysseus* for the reader by contrasting it with Hollywood's 'Sword and Sandal' movies, a form of popular culture through which many children and adults may have experienced a visual depiction of the classical world. Messenger Davies outlining *Odysseus* through what it is not indicates how much it was breaking with convention in representing Homeric epic on screen. Indeed, the innovations of *Odysseus* may have contributed to it winning the Royal Television Society's award for Best Children's Programme, 1986.

Throughout the twelve episodes the narrative draws on a wide range of ancient and modern accounts of Odysseus' travels, not only Homer's epic poems. Indeed, the programme nowhere claims to be adapting Homer's *Odyssey*, although the book which followed the television series contains the following phrase amid the publishing details: 'The original stories are of course by Homer'.⁴⁹ This is perfectly true, and it gives prominence to the name 'Homer' but in fact a range of sources contributed to *Odysseus*, as Robinson himself explains in an article for *Books for Keeps: The Children's Book Magazine*:

EXT As well as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* we've used the play *Philoctetes*, and the *Oresteia*, Robert Graves, *The Anger of Achilles*, and the *Little Iliad* - about ten different sources in all. I don't think I've made anything up but I've run some characters together and sometimes I've trade[d] an explicit contemporary reference. Some scholars may get cross about that but for me that is what storytellers do and my retelling is part of a long cultural tradition.⁵⁰

It is clear that Robinson's interest in story-telling is coupled with an interest in retelling the stories which originate in Homer, but Robinson goes on to acknowledge that changes must be made to make them accessible and inspirational to a child viewer of 1980s television:

EXT if in my telling I can make them a bit more accessible, democratising the references, finding contemporary resonances to illuminate things which were different 'then' but are related to 'now', then maybe there is a chance to open up the whole thing to more people.⁵¹

The child audiences of *Odysseus* were engaging with Homeric epic via Robinson's retelling in a way that touched at the story-telling roots of Greek epic, which was performed to ancient audiences by a solo artist: the audiences were experiencing Homer as oral poetry, and Tony Robinson was playing the bard.

A3 Conclusion

Ulysses 31 and *Odysseus* used their unique generic forms to contemporise Odysseus' adventures for young audiences and to push their respective television formats into new uncharted space. The manner in which this occurs also indicates how both programmes worked equally hard to engage closely with their Homeric sources and wider Greek mythology, reflecting the cultural significance that Homer's *Odyssey* was seen to possess. The makers of *Ulysses 31* crafted a hero using popular film culture and Japanese techniques in animation to frame Ulysses' heroism in a way that held international appeal. By contrast, Robinson and Curtis made their *Odysseus* accessible to UK audiences using colloquial English language and humour, and the BBC's format of Jackanory familiar to UK viewers.

This was set in recognisably English towns, countryside settings and seascapes that created a localised and anglicised Odysseus.

The tension between fidelity and innovation can be particularly fierce for the creators of children's television because of the concern among some programme-makers to inform and educate children about their own cultural heritage while creating enjoyable and inspiring works in their own right. *Ulysses 31* and *Odysseus* aspire to this. The freedom of animation for visualising fictional space (past or future) is apparent in *Ulysses 31* in its attempt to bring the stories of Odysseus to life, whereas in *Odysseus* Robinson takes on the role of the bard employing the lively performance and innovative take on *Jackanory* to reanimate Odysseus with an English town and country setting as the backdrop. The creative approach of each programme was shaped by their divergent contexts of creation and production, by the different genres within which they worked, and by appealing to international (cinema and anime) and localised (BBC TV) conventions in visual media. Both programmes appeared on the screens of children who viewed 'Children's BBC' in 1985-6, itself a new, more interactive format for children's programming. This provided first contact, or at least early contact, for children with the medium of television, animation and the adventures of Odysseus.

Table 7.1: *Ulysses 31*: a comparison of English and French episode titles

1. Vengeance of the Gods	1. Le Cyclope
2. The Lost Planet	2. La planète perdue
3. The Black Sphere	3. Hératos
4. Guardian of the Cosmic Winds	4. Éole
5. The Eternal Punishment	5. Sisyphe
6. Flowers of Fear	6. Les fleurs sauvages
7. Mutiny on Board	7. La révolte des compagnons
8. Secret of the Sphinx	8. Le Sphinx

9. Cronus, Father of Time	9. Chronos
10. Temple of the Lestrigones	10. Les Lestrygons
11. The Seat of Forgetfulness	11. Le fauteuil de l'oubli
12. Trapped Between Fire and Ice	12. Charybde et Scylla
13. Phantoms from the Swamp	13. Le marais des doubles
14. Song of Danger	14. Les sirens
15. Before the Flood	15. La deuxième arche
16. The Magic Spells of Circe	16. Circé la magicienne
17. Lost in the Labyrinth	17. Le Minotaure
18. At the Heart of the Universe	18. Atlas
19. The Hidden Truth	19. Nérée ou la vérité engloutie
20. The Magician in Black	20. Le magicien noir
21. Rebellion on Lemnos	21. Les révoltées de Lemnos
22. The City of Cortex	22. La cité de Cortex
23. Calypso	23. Calypso
24. Strange Meeting	24. Ulysse rencontre Ulysse
25. The Lotus Eaters	25. Les Lotophages
26. The Kingdom of Hades	26. Le royaume d'Hadès

Table 7.2 *Odysseus the Greatest Hero of Them All*: episode titles and *Radio Times* entries

<p>1. <u>The Golden Slagheap</u> ‘Odysseus takes a tip from both his wily Grandpa and Penelope’s chamber-pot. He falls in love, and the adventure begins.’</p> <p>2. <u>The Burly Nun</u> ‘Who is the sinister one-eyed man? Why is Achilles dressed in women’s clothes? And where is Troy?’</p> <p>3. <u>The Colour of Birds’ Eggs</u> ‘The siege of Troy starts well enough - until the Greeks get bored and begin to quarrel.’</p> <p>4. <u>Achilles’ Heel</u> ‘Achilles is niggled when Trojan spears make a six-foot hedgehog out of his best chum. Odysseus persuades him to take revenge.’</p> <p>5. <u>Revenge of the White Goddess</u> ‘The Greek army chooses a new hero, and Odysseus takes Diomedes down a sewer on a secret mission.’</p>	<p>7. <u>The Fat Batsman</u> ‘The Cyclops traps the Greeks in his cave and gets ready for a tasty kebab. But it’s one in the eye for him when his sheep are stolen.’</p> <p>8. <u>The Wind and the Wallabies</u> ‘With half their colleagues eaten by cannibals, the men decide to turn vegetarian. But they still eat like pigs....’</p> <p>9. <u>The Faces of the Dead</u> ‘Odysseus meets old friends, and listens to the world’s most dangerous music.’</p> <p>10. <u>The Pirate Queen</u> ‘On the way home Odysseus loses his clothes but finds some friends.’</p> <p>11. <u>Beggar in the Rubbish Heap</u> ‘After 20 long years, Odysseus returns home. But no welcome awaits him ...’</p>
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<p>6. <u>Getting In</u> ‘Odysseus develops a brilliant new weapon, and the prime minister makes her last, fatal, mistake.’</p>	<p>12. <u>The Showdown</u> ‘If Odysseus wants to live happily ever after, one final heroic deed remains to be done.’</p>
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Figure 7.1: Yumi, Ulysses, Telemachus and Nono in *Ulysses 31*. Screenshot.



Figure 7.2: Tony Robinson narrates Episode 10 of *Odysseus the Greatest Hero of them All*. Screenshot.



¹ *Ulysses 31* was first broadcast on 'Children's BBC' 7 November 1985 - 8 May 1986 and *Odysseus* was first broadcast twice a week 13 November - 22 December 1986, and repeated 11 October 1987 - 24 January 1988.

² The term 'anglified' is used to highlight the choice of setting, performer and idiom used in the series, but the series was broadcast to audiences throughout Britain, which only serves to highlight the complex overlap of British and English identities.

³ E.g. Messenger Davies 1989, 2001, 2010; Steemers 2010, 2013, 2016.

⁴ E.g. the work of ‘The Children’s Media Foundation’:

www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/ (last accessed 6 July 2016), formerly ‘Save Kid’s TV’; Home (2011) raises concerns about the quality of UK television output for children.

⁵ The notable exception to this is Hodge and Tripp (1986) who provided a theoretically informed audience-based analysis of the children’s cartoon *Fangface* (1978), arguing that such cartoons are complex structures which engage the child viewer on multiple levels as they decode the cartoon visually, verbally and aesthetically. More recently Wells (2007: 201-2) has summarised his approach to theorising animation, which was first developed in his seminal 1998 monograph. The recent three-volume history of world animation by Bendazzi, (2016) is another important step in scholarship on animation. On other forms of animation cf. Moseley (2016), who provides the first academic discussion of UK stop-frame animation 1961-1974.

⁶ As Lindner (2008: 39) notes: ‘The children’s animation film may be among one of the most lucrative genres for studios worldwide, but so far this genre has been widely ignored in academic research dealing with classical topics.’ See also Lindner (forthcoming) and Castello and Scilabra (2015) who survey the connection of anime and classical antiquity but play down the importance of *Ulysses 31* within this tradition. Even Ray Harryhausen, the animator on the films *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *Clash of the Titans* (1981), was involved in an unrealised version of animating the stories of Odysseus: *The Story of Odysseus* (1996-98) for Carrington and Cosgrove Hall Productions. Cf. Marciniak (2016) for an important volume on the growing scholarly interest in children’s literature and classical antiquity.

⁷ Cf. Wrigley (2015a: 173-4) discusses Homeric storytelling on BBC radio which also appeals to the audience’s imagination although without the visual stimulus of television.

⁸ The BBC, a public service broadcaster, was created with the aim to ‘inform, educate and entertain’, and these words still form the BBC’s mission statement in 2016:

www.bbc.co.uk/corporate2/insidethebbc/whoweare/mission_and_values (last accessed 6 July 2016).

⁹ News release for the launch of 'Children's BBC':

web.archive.org/web/20141106183544/http://www.thebroomcupboard.co.uk/page2.html (last accessed 6 July 2016).

¹⁰ Steemers (2016: 107).

¹¹ Murnaghan (2011: 340).

¹² 'Ulysses' is the Latin name for the hero Odysseus, and the French is 'Ulysse' which, given the French origins of *Ulysses 31*, offers a plausible reason as to why the name Ulysses is maintained in the English-language versions, whereas the German and Greek version is retitled: *Odysseus 31*.

¹³ Homer, *Odyssey* 10.488-540: Circe explains the tortuous route home to Odysseus. Circe is more famous for turning Odysseus' men into pigs, an aspect which both *Ulysses 31* and *Odysseus* preserve when their hero meets the sorceress Circe.

¹⁴ In the case of cinematic film it is common to cite Lt. Ellen Ripley (*Alien*, dir. R. Scott, 1979) or Sarah Connor (*The Terminator*, dir. J. Cameron 1984) as counter examples, but Conrad 2011 surveys the marginalised roles of female characters in the majority of science-fiction film. As King and Krzywinska (2000: 40) note in their overview of female roles in sci-fi films: 'Space may offer an escape from many terrestrial limitations, but the 'glass ceiling' usually remains in place'. On television of the 1970s-80s the story is little different; the sci-fi series *Star Maidens* (1976, UK/West Germany) was notable for replacing patriarchy with matriarchy but as a means to critique the contemporary feminist movement of the 1970s, as discussed by Sharp (2008). In British sci-fi television the dominance of male characters is reflected in Wright (2005), who surveys British sci-fi television while noting its engagement with contemporary political and social debates but no consideration is given to feminist or

25

gender debates, and *Star Maidens* is only mentioned in passing as ‘a less successful SF-comedy series’ (Wright 2005: 300).

¹⁵ Episode 24, ‘Strange Meeting’. This episode is discussed below.

¹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey* 10.275-306.

¹⁷ During Episode 12, Telemachus looks at the ship containing the man from 2001 and says: ‘I think I saw a model identical to this one in a museum on the exploration of the solar system’. Later we see Ulysses’ reflection in a lens-like computer screen which immediately evokes HAL 9000.

¹⁸ Internet rumours circulate that a legal dispute resulted, but no evidence of this is forthcoming.

¹⁹ The French title, ‘Ulysses meets Ulysses’, highlights the connection between the two Ulysses-characters in the episode.

²⁰ Homer, *Odyssey* 21.404-13; translation D. C. H. Rieu (1991: 327).

²¹ On peplum movies see Aziza (1998) and Boschi and Bozzato (2005). Verreth (2008: 65) provides a survey of films about Odysseus, and he counts ‘more than eighty titles from 1905 to the present’. Paul (2013b: 139-40) discusses the initial box-office success of *Ulysse*.

²² *Ulysses 31* also brought together Jean Chalopin and Bernard Deyriès whose collaborations with Japanese animators produced defining cartoons of 1980s. Most well known in the UK would be perhaps *Mysterious Cities of Gold* (also shown on ‘Children’s BBC’), where Araki Shingo was again involved, as were the writers of the popular title-music of both animations (except in Japan), Haim Saban and Shuki Levy.

²³ The full series was not broadcast in Japan until 1991.

²⁴ In the UK *Ulysses 31* was broadcast on BBC 1 (1985-6, at times between 4.10 pm and 4.35 pm), Channel 4 (1993, 6.30 am), The Children’s Channel (1994-5), The Disney Channel (1998-9), Fox Kids (1999), Jetix (2005-), Toon Disney (2005-). Knowledge of rebroadcasts

in other countries varies, but some information can be found currently on two websites, which also contain detailed records of the worldwide merchandising connected to *Ulysses 31*: ulysses31.saitis.net/versetrang.htm#Index and simonin.pagesperso-orange.fr/Ulysse31 (both last accessed 6 July 2016).

²⁵ Krémer (2002). A DVD of one *Soirée Gloubiboulga*, including *Ulysses 31*, was released in 2003: *Gloubi Boulga Night* (Universal Pictures). Examples of ‘*Soirées Gloubiboulga*’ include: May 4 2002 Lille; 5 April 2003 Bordeaux; 14 June 2003 Grand Rex, Paris; 15 November 2003 Geneva.

²⁶ Potter (2014). My thanks to Amanda Potter for allowing me to see the data underpinning her doctoral research. The five respondents comprised two female general viewers (i.e. not classicists), one fan of *Xena*, one female classicist (BA and MA in Ancient History), and one male ‘partner of a classicist’. The data was collected between 2006-2011.

²⁷ Nagahama is renowned for his work on the ‘Romance Super Robot Trilogy’ in the 1970s, but he was also a director on famous anime including *Versailles no Bara* (*Versailles Rose*, 1979) and *Star of the Giants* (1968). Clements (2013: 143-4) discusses *Star of the Giants* for the ways that Nagahama and his animators employed new technologies in xerography: ‘to transfer foreshortening, deformation, impressionistic speed lines and other artistic effects directly to their cels’ (where a ‘cel’ is a transparent celluloid on which animators draw). These techniques were deployed in *Ulysses 31*.

²⁸ Mecha anime focuses on robots and machines and involves detailed models of each often related in toy-manufacture.

²⁹ Drouin (1981).

³⁰ McCloud (2006: 215-23).

³¹ Ledoux and Ranney (1997: 3).

³² Faviez (1996): ‘Les japonais apportent un nouveau souffle par rapport à Disney, ... j’ai été déçu par les USA. Les concepts y sont souvent les mêmes, trop manichéens.’

³³ Bainbridge (2010: 2).

³⁴ The French ‘Thémis’ is a transliteration of the Greek ‘Themis’, a goddess of ancient law and order.

³⁵ Broadcasting Standards Commission survey. See Messenger Davies (2001: 233).

³⁶ E.g. 24 April 1986 a variety of *Ulysses 31* drawings are visible behind the presenter Debbie Flint who also holds a further pile of pictures: www.thebroomcupboard.co.uk/page2.html (last accessed 6 July 2016).

³⁷ *The Broom Cupboard*: www.thebroomcupboard.co.uk/page7.html (last accessed 6 July 2016).

³⁸ Episode 2: ‘The Burly Nun’ and Episode 7: ‘The Fat Batsman’ are held on VHS by the BFI.

³⁹ Robinson and Curtis (1986: 2, and 1987: 4).

⁴⁰ *Radio Times*, 3 January 1985, p. 91.

⁴¹ Graves (1981: 91).

⁴² Robinson and Curtis (1986: 2).

⁴³ Home (1993: 80-5).

⁴⁴ Author’s interview with A. Beeching, 17 April 2015.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Homer, *Odyssey* 6.186-315: Nausicaa, daughter of King Alcinous, helps the ship-wrecked Odysseus in gaining access to Alcinous’ court from where our hero finally manages to secure safe passage home to Ithaca.

⁴⁸ Messenger Davies (1986: 30). In interview Beeching (2015) acknowledged that *Jackanory* books encouraged children to obtain books from the library or to buy them.

⁴⁹ Robinson and Curtis (1986: 2).

⁵⁰ Robinson (1986).

⁵¹ Robinson (1986).